Discernment for Holy Orders in the Diocese of Iowa

Updated 12/12/24

Welcome Statement

The process of discernment is a profound journey of spiritual exploration and decision-making aligned with God's will. It's a path of deep reflection, seeking to understand one's calling, whether it be towards ordained ministry or other forms of service. This journey is both personal and communal, often beginning in solitude and also involving the wisdom of the Christian community.

For those feeling a potential call to ordination, the Diocese of Iowa offers support through our local clergy and the Commission on Ministry (COM).

Introduction

The discernment process exploring a potential call to ordained ministry is a sacred and continuous endeavor, inviting individuals to listen closely to God's voice and the echoes of their own hearts in service to others.

Embarking on a discernment journey is a deeply personal and spiritual process that requires thoughtful reflection and guidance. The following steps are crafted to help you navigate your way through the process.

Step 1 Individual Discernment:

The first step in the discernment process is to take a look at your own life and experiences to determine where you feel God may be calling you. Take some time to look at the question through the following lenses. Remember, in discernment, it is best to find space to be quiet and contemplate these questions. Giving yourself time to deeply look at these questions will help uncover areas of your ministry that you would like to more fully explore.

- **Personal Reflection**: Engage in self-reflection with guiding questions to understand your spiritual inclinations and their alignment with your life goals.
    - W lights you up and why?
    - What are your talents and how could they be used in ordained ministry?

    - Why is now the right time to take action?
- **Personal Discussions**: Share and discuss your spiritual journey with trusted family and/or friends to gauge their thoughts and feelings.
    - What do they see that you do not?
- **Emotional Connection**: Reflect on the emotions tied to your spiritual path. Are there scripture passages that resonate with these feelings?
    - What Bible stories illustrate your gifts or concerns?
    - What was God's response in those passages?
- **Life Review**: Consider your current commitments, life trajectory, and any external influences that may affect your discernment.
    - Is this the right time to take on new responsibilities?
    - Do you have the right support both emotionally and financially?
    - What might you need to give up to take this new step?
- **Community Concerns**: Are there issues that deeply move you? Are there people you feel called to serve?
    - Where is the gap that your unique gifts fill?
    - How have you been divinely made to serve that community?

If after completing your individual discernment, you continue to feel a pull to ordained ministry, the next step is to visit with a clergy person and to write your spiritual autobiography. These steps are flexible, recognizing some people may choose to speak to a clergy person prior to writing, while others may prefer to write beforehand.

Steps 2-3 Write a Spiritual Autobiography:

Writing a spiritual autobiography is a deeply introspective practice that allows you to explore and document the evolution of your faith and spiritual life. This also helps create context for any future conversations you will have throughout the discernment process. Here's a guide to help you craft your own spiritual narrative:

1. **Begin with Introspection**: Set aside dedicated time for reflection. Consider this an evolving document that you will revisit and refine over time.
2. **Outline Your Journey**: Break down your life into five-year segments, starting from your earliest memories. This structure helps you organize and focus on different phases of your life.
3. **Identify Significant Individuals**: Think about the people who have influenced your spiritual journey. This could include family members, teachers, religious leaders, or even characters from books. Reflect on how they've shaped your beliefs and values.
4. **Material and Financial Context**: Document the environments you've lived in and the resources that were available to you. How have these factors influenced your spiritual outlook?
5. **Joys and Pastimes**: Consider the activities that bring you happiness and how they relate to your spirituality. Our hobbies and interests can often reflect and inform our spiritual lives.

6. **Spiritual Climate**: Go beyond formal religion and consider the broader spiritual influences in your life. How has your cultural and familial background contributed to your spiritual beliefs?
7. **Recurring Patterns**: As you review each life segment, note any recurring themes, symbols, or values. These can reveal the consistent threads in your spiritual fabric.

Remember, your spiritual autobiography is not just a personal document but a dialogue with the divine and the community of faith. It's a testament to your unique spiritual path and a tool for further discernment and growth.

If you feel called to ordination after completing your spiritual autobiography, it is time to visit with a clergy person, if you have not already done so.

Steps 2-3 Conversations with a Clergy Person:

The next step would be to participate in a series of conversations with a clergy person to help you gain clarity around your calling and what that vocation might look like in practice. The topics for the meetings should include those listed below.

- **Spiritual Autobiography**: If you have already completed your spiritual autobiography, share a copy with your clergy person prior to your first meeting. They will read it and come to that meeting prepared to discuss your discernment and will have questions that your spiritual autobiography brought forward. This can feel vulnerable, be prepared to speak openly and honestly about your path. The clergy person can help guide the creation of your spiritual autobiography, if you have yet to write one.
- **Understanding Ordination**: Explore the meaning of being ordained clergy and what the requirements would likely be for ordination. Explore the differences of diaconal, priestly, and episcopal ministry.
- **Family History**: Examine how your family background influences your spiritual direction.
    - What from your family history will help your ministry?
    - What family history might make your ministry challenging?
- **Current Vocation**: Assess any work/ministry you've been involved in. This does not refer only to church or religious based ministry, but includes all ways we minister in our daily lives.
    - Where have you already responded to God's call?
    - How would ordination build on the old?
    - How would ordination be a diversion from a previous path?
- **Church Ministries**: Learn about various lay ministries and consider training for licensed ministries.
    - Take a look at the Episcopal Church's website to explore and discuss what options exist
    - Take a look at diocesan partnerships and available programs like Bishop Kemper School for Ministry (https://www.bishopkemperschool.org) and Bexley Seabury (https://bexleyseabury.edu)

- **Spiritual Direction**: Seek guidance from a trained spiritual director. You may wish to pursue spiritual direction regardless of your ministry to assist with discernment. If you pursue ordination, this will be a required element of your discernment throughout the ordination process. A list of spiritual directors is available from the diocesan office.
- **Leadership Assessment**: Discuss your leadership roles within your congregation and in other areas of your life with clergy.
    - How do your current roles prepare you for ordination?
    - What areas might you need to develop new or build upon existing skills?
    - How comfortable are you with conflict and making tough or unpopular decisions?

Move Towards Further Discernment: If, after personal reflection and discussions with a clergy member, you and your clergy person continue to see a potential call to ordained ministry, the next step is to form a discernment team.

Step 4 Create a Discernment Team

The objectives and structure of a discernment team are designed to help guide an individual through a spiritual journey of self-discovery and understanding of God's call. This process is designed to be gradual and introspective, allowing you to discern your calling with clarity and support from your faith community. Remember, discernment is a journey, not a destination, and it unfolds uniquely for each individual.

Objectives of a Discernment Team:

- To aid discerners in understanding God's call.
- To provide support and encouragement.
- To reflect on the discerner's thoughts and inquiries.
- To learn about the discerner's history and perception of their calling.

Size and Formation of a Discernment Team:

- Typically comprises 3 to 6 members, reflecting God's diversity.
- Members are chosen by both the discerner and clergy and may include individuals from outside the congregation. This could also be in the form of a regional discernment team.
- Individuals who will provoke thoughtful inquiry and discussion.
- Members gifted with honesty and integrity.
- Individuals who prioritize the well-being of the Church at large.
- At least one person with experience in the ministry area you feel called to.

Team Collaboration and Confidentiality:

- The team collaborates early on to define roles and maintain confidentiality.
- The team will utilize the Minnesota Discernment Process (available on the website).

Initiating the Journey:

- The first meeting is foundational as it lays the groundwork for the process.
- Essential materials include the Book of Common Prayer, the diocesan flow chart for Holy Orders, and a shared understanding of the discernment process.

The scheduling of discernment sessions is a flexible process, tailored to the unique dynamics of each discernment team and the individual's journey. Here are the key points regarding the scheduling:

- **Session Duration**: Discernment meetings typically last between 1.5 to 2 hours.
- **Session Frequency:** While the number of meetings will differ, we require a minimum of 6 sessions.
- **Overall Process**: The entire discernment process can range from 9 to 18 months.
- **Adjustments**: The duration may be adjusted based on the team's dynamics and the individual's needs.
- **Congregation Size Impact**: Smaller congregations might move through the process more quickly due to existing familiarity, while larger ones may need additional time.
- **Consensus on Conclusion**: The team collectively decides when the discernment process has reached its conclusion, often arriving at a natural consensus.

In the discernment process, it is crucial for the team to observe and reflect on various attributes and dispositions of the aspirant. These include:

- **Relationship with Jesus and God:** How does the aspirant relate to God in their daily life? How do they participate in communal worship? How does aspirant display Christian discipleship? What does their prayer life look like? How is the Holy Spirit active in the aspirant's life?
- **Communication Skills:** The ability to express thoughts clearly and listen effectively.
- **Relational Abilities**: The capacity to build and maintain meaningful relationships.
- **Personal Integrity and Self-Esteem**: A sense of honesty and self-worth that guides behavior and interactions.
- **Physical Health and Vitality**: The overall well-being and energy levels that enable active engagement in daily tasks.
- **Intellectual Talents and Strengths**: Cognitive abilities and areas of knowledge or expertise.
- **Awareness of Personal Capabilities and Limitations**: Recognition of one's own strengths and areas for growth.

These observations help the team support the discerner in a holistic manner, considering all aspects of their being.

Concluding the Discernment:

- The process concludes when clarity is achieved or if progress halts.
- The group may recommend a new or expanded lay ministry or further personal study.

- If the discernment team hears a call to the diaconate or the priesthood the discerner may decide to pursue ordained ministry.

- If the prospective call is toward ordination, both parties must mutually discern a specific call to either diaconal or priestly ministry.

Reporting to Clergy and Vestry:

- The team keeps the clergy and Vestry informed of the aspirant's discernment progress and outcomes, ensuring confidentiality is upheld.
- The team will prepare a written report that will be given to the clergy and vestry with their recommendation. If you and the discernment team mutually discern a call to ordination, the recommendation and subsequent paperwork must clearly indicate a call to either the diaconate or the priesthood.

Reports should include:

- The discernment process utilized.
- The results of the process.
- Recognized skills and gifts that indicate a potential call towards ordination, expanded lay ministry, religious life, or other.
- Further recommendations for the discerner's development.

Should the discernment team recommend initiation of a diocesan exploration of your call to ordained ministry, the necessary formal documentation from the diocese must be completed and submitted as outlined in step 5.

Step 5 Form submission

Prior to scheduling the Official Appointment with the Bishop, the following forms must be submitted to the Office of the Bishop for review.

1) Nomination form*
2) Baptismal certificate
3) Confirmation certificate
4) Vestry indication of support (financially and involvement in preparation for ordination) by letter and/or on Nomination form
5) Report from applicant's discernment committee (with summary information about their time spent together, description of the process, areas covered, and conclusions)
6) Official academic transcripts (from institution/s)
7) Nominee's Questionnaire*
8) Spiritual Autobiography
9) Letter to the Bishop from sponsoring clergy

*available at https://www.iowaepiscopal.org/ordination

Mail Nomination Packet and Forms to:
Office of the Bishop
Episcopal Diocese of Iowa
225 – 37th Street
Des Moines, IA 50312-4305

Step 6 Interview with the Bishop

After your paperwork has been received and reviewed by the bishop, an in person interview may be scheduled. After your interview the bishop will instruct you on next steps. These may include an invitation into further discernment, suggestions on other forms of ministry that might be a better vocational fit, or presentation to the Commission on Ministry for a larger group interview. After the official appointment with bishop, if proceeding, the nominee receives these canonically required forms:

- *Life History Questionnaire* (26 pp) to complete/mail to psychologist prior to assessment
- *Medical Examination form* (p 1-2 to be completed by nominee; p 3-4 by physician at time of physical appointment, then mailed to the bishop)

Before an interview with the Commission on Ministry, you will be expected to complete psychological and physical examinations. Complete financial and criminal background checks will also be required during the ordination process. Prior to the psychological assessment appointment, the nominee will make payment to the Episcopal Diocese of Iowa for a share of the assessment cost (share to be determined with the bishop). When complete, the report is sent to the bishop and to the nominee. The bishop and nominee then meet (zoom) to discuss the report prior to a decision by the bishop for the nominee to proceed to the Commission on Ministry.

Step 7 Interview with the Commission on Ministry

If requested by the bishop, the nominee will interview with the Commission on Ministry (COM). The COM is comprised of a combination of lay and ordained members from throughout the diocese. They represent a broad base of our diocese and are interested in deeply listening to the movement of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. They approach interviews with a deep desire to help both the interviewee and the entire church, hear how God might be moving in our present lives to the betterment of ourselves, our church, and our communities.

After your interview and internal consultation, the Commission on Ministry may recommend you for Postulancy (signifying your official entrance into the ordination process). If the Bishop concurs, you will receive a personalized Formation Plan outlining the necessary steps and requirements to move towards ordination in either the diaconate or the priesthood.

Information about formation possibilities

The Episcopal Church has canonical requirements for ordination that differ depending on the order. The Formation Plan is designed to help you meet those requirements. It may include, but is not limited to, any or all of the following:

- A formal course of study at an Episcopal seminary or other formation program appropriate to the order sought
- Clinical Pastoral Education
- Field Education or Contextual Education
- Safe Church training
- Anti-Racism training
- Spiritual Direction
- General Ordination Exam or Diaconal Exam